

The Land is The Chief

By RAYMOND E. CRIST

It is the land that freemen till,
That sober-suited Freedom chose:
The land, where, girt with friends or
foes,
A man may speak the thing he will;
A land of settled government,
A land of just and old renown,
Where Freedom slowly broadens down
From precedent to precedent.

—Tennyson, "You Ask Me Why."

There is a proverb of the Negroes of South Africa to the effect that "the land is the chief," and an examination might lead us to the conclusion that it has more than local significance.

IRELAND

The invasion of Ireland was under way in 1170 when adventurers from England began to take sides in the quarrels of the chieftains of the Irish clans. The adventurers soon had the support of the English royalty. Under Henry VIII the actual conquest of Ireland was undertaken, and the struggle was carried on with great fury because it became religious as well as political. Both the English and the Scotch adopted the method of planting colonists, by which Ulster passed almost entirely into the hands of immigrants from England and Scotland. At the end of the wars of the seventeenth century, the holdings of most of the Irish were confiscated by the English, only a sixth of the whole island, and that in the poorest parts, remaining in the hands of the original inhabitants of the country. As late as 1903, 750 landlords owned more than half of the island, and three alone had more than 100,000 acres.

The consequences for Ireland of this dispossession of the native Irish have been far-reaching. Except in Ulster, where landholding Scotch and English settlers cultivated their own farms, the system of vast landed estates was disastrous, because the absentee landlords had no interest in agriculture. Conditions in the country became shocking. Agriculture was practiced on run-down soils, which were never fertilized, by a steadily increasing and ignorant rural population, always at the mercy of a famine. From the beginning

We are grateful to Dr. Crist, who is a professor in the department of geology and geography, University of Illinois, for permission to reprint this illuminating article, which appeared in *The Scientific Monthly*, October, 1939.

of the nineteenth century there was a steady stream of emigration directed mainly towards the United States. It increased very much after the great famine of 1846, when the potato crop, the chief subsistence crop of the inhabitants, failed because of a blight.

Hence there are very good reasons why Great Britain has had an "Irish question" for several centuries. Concessions had to be made occasionally to prevent armed outbreaks of the peasants. A series of laws which were passed from 1869 on enabled many renters to become landowners, with the result that to-day there are six times as many farmers who work their own land in agricultural Ireland as in industrial England, and the system of small landholding tends more and more to predominate. With it has come a certain degree of economic well-being. National aspirations, heightened by religious antipathies and economic inequalities, resulted in the civil strife of 1919-21, and finally in the accord of 1921, which granted Dominion status to Ireland. Since that time conditions have improved. The interdependence of England and Ireland is recognized more and more by both peoples, farms owned by the operator have increased in number, and rents to absentee English landlords, long a nightmare to the Irish, have been abolished.

SPAIN IN AMERICA

It should be kept in mind that there were two paramount motives which



drove the Spaniards to exploration and conquest in the New World: The quest for gold (el dorado) and the desire to add new members to the Roman Catholic Church. In the high plateaus of the New World the Spaniards found millions of people living together in great empires in an advanced stage of civilization. But the native leaders were ruthlessly set aside and the land on which their subjects lived was portioned out into fiefs, called *encomiendas*, according less to extension of surface than to size of the population upon it. The higher the rank of the chieftain, the larger his estate.

A few villages were permitted by royal grant to keep their traditional communal plots (*ejidos*). But most of the land was concentrated in great landed estates in the hands of a few overlords, and the native inhabitants came under the absolute control of the new white masters. Theoretically, this was done so that the Indians would be indoctrinated with Christianity, and the estates were granted by the Crown for only *dos o tres vidas* (two or three generations). But many of these estates remained in the hands of the same family for over four hundred years, and it was usual for the owners, the *hacendado*, to live as a feudal baron in the great house, the *hacienda*, in the center of the estate. The *hacendado* was the highest court of appeal to the simple peons living on his land.

MEXICO

Mexico is a land of distant horizons. The great plateaus of the interior, which are high enough to have a temperate climate and where as a result most of the population is concentrated, are hemmed in by the far horizon of a purple mountain chain. Most of the mountains are volcanoes, many extinct, but some of them active from time to time. Indeed, the truncated cone of the volcano is a motif which runs through Mexican life—pre-Columbian, as well as modern. When one sees the great prom-

fusion of volcanic cones it is not at all surprising that such man-made structures as temples and observatories were, even before the arrival of Cortez, modeled after them.

But Mexico is not all a volcano-girdled plateau. It is built up in layers, or strata: the hot lands (*tierra caliente*) around the edges, then the cool or temperate lands (*tierra templada*) and the cold, high mountains (the *tierra fria* or *paramos*). But these are not easily delimited regions. Streams have cut great gashes in the form of canyons into the central plateau so that there is a complex interpenetration of one climatic region by the other. The result is that the sharpest contrast in land forms, climate and the cultural landscape are found very close together. From one point it is often possible to view areas representative of almost all the major climatic types, from the tropical rainforest to the tundra: from the fertile valley bottoms, where bananas and oranges grow, up through coffee plantations to the dry mesa country, where maguey, maize and barley grow, and still on as far as the eye can reach through the grazing lands, then the timberlands and finally to the slopes eternally covered with snow.

Against this background of sharp physical contrasts there has been an interplay of the many forces—social, cultural, racial, economic—which have gone toward the molding of present-day Mexico. During the regime of the dictator, Porfirio Diaz, the industrial policies of modern nations were adopted in Mexico without destroying the feudal structure of the Mexican economic organization. Foreign trade increased from \$63,000,000 in 1885 to \$239,000,000 in 1907, and railway mileage increased from almost nil in the 70's to 16,000 miles in 1911. But this industrialization was paralleled by a rapid increase in the cost of living without a corresponding rise in wages. The oil fields and mines were largely foreign-owned, and profits from them left the country.

The Hacienda. The full flowering of the hacienda system occurred during the Diaz regime. The land of Mexico, the support of the great mass

of the population, was in the hands of a very few people. Some 60 per cent of the private land in Mexico was owned in estates of 2,500 acres or more, and almost 25 per cent of the privately owned land was in the hands of only 114 proprietors. Furthermore, the process of concentration of land in the hands of a few was continuing. Villages were deprived of their communal holdings through the encroachment of "colonization" companies, or through the manipulation of water rights by a *hacendado*. Such a landlord might boast blandly of having moved the "mojonera," the boundary post of a village *ejido* with water rights to a certain stream, which the *hacendado* thereafter diverted to his own estate. Feuds over land often had at the root a feud over water. Land was also taken away from "rebellious" villages—particularly Indian villages with good land—by the government, often controlled by the local landlord. As a result, the inhabitants of what had once been free villages were gradually forced to become wage laborers on the haciendas, where they were soon tied to the soil by debts and were paid in kind rather than in money in the hacienda store—the infamous *tienda de raya*.

Living conditions were very bad on the estates, where often no attention was paid by the landlords even to housing his peons. In time the miserable people, who lived like beasts, without the most rudimentary principles of hygiene, became apathetic, morally bankrupt, spiritually insolvent. Small wonder that the cry of the landless for "Tierra y Libertad" (land and liberty) became with each year more insistent, until at last in 1910 revolution broke out. Between 1910 and 1921 there was a nation-wide shift in the population from resident hacienda communities to free villages; the population in the former was reduced from 5,511,284 to 3,913,769. These figures show



that the oppressed people fled from their heartless landlords during the period of social and political upheaval in order to return to the free villages where they could till their small plots of land under the age-old system of communal tenure.

Land Distribution. Unfortunately, land distribution has proceeded slowly. In 1930, fifteen years after the inauguration of the agrarian reform, almost seven tenths of the total economically active population engaged in agriculture still belonged to the disinherited landless masses dependent upon day wages or such meager earnings as may be derived from tenant farming or share-cropping. President Cardenas saw that the aims of the Revolution of 1910 had not been completely fulfilled largely because there was no middle class to carry them through. Hence, he has speeded up the program of land distribution. In the first twenty months of his administration he awarded some 3,000 villages nearly four and one half million hectares (about 10,000,000 acres) of land—over half as much land as had been distributed by all his predecessors together.

But most of the *ejidatarios* (those working village communal plots) must have credit: long-term credit for relatively permanent types of equipment as well as short-term advances for seed, fertilizers and consumption goods. If this credit is not extended by the government the *ejidatario* is at the mercy of the *hacendado*, loan shark and local politician. The problem of *ejido* credit is a problem in education, and progress must be measured not in terms of profits, but in changed attitudes and values, in the growth of initiative, responsibility and the cooperative spirit. Educational progress is extremely slow, but even if the rural school—product of the Agrarian Revolution—had failed in all other respects it has kindled hope of better things to come and an enthusiasm for life in hundreds of communities. And with education has come greater geographical and social mobility.

In conclusion, it may be said with reference to Mexico that the rural villages must be given the land which they occupy and till if economic well-

being is to come to them and consequently to the country as a whole, and the benefits of modern civilization must be brought to the Indians without impeding the development and reinvigoration of the native culture. It is significant that Cardenas keeps insisting that he wants to see more Mexicans and fewer Indians. In other words, the free Mexico of to-morrow has its roots in the soil, and in the racial and cultural base which was denied for four centuries.

In that free Mexico, the hacendado will no longer be able to say contemptuously that "the peon is a machine which runs on pulque" (the native beer, made of the fermented juice of the agave), because, instead of the sodden impotence of peons tied in debt slavery to the hacienda, there will be social and political integration, unity and order.

Of course, many foreign investors in Mexico will continue to complain because they are no longer able to

realize as much on investments as formerly, and are forced to reinvest a part of their profits in that country. Many rapacious politicians will continue to abuse the reforms and become rich men. Many pudgy generals will, under the pretext of breaking up great landed estates, themselves become great landlords.

In the March issue Dr. Crist will deal with the land question in Puerto Rico, Java, Cuba, Africa, Kenya and Soviet Russia.